

# THE FLAG PARAMOUNT BY O. HENRY

A DOZEN quarts of champagne, in conjunction with an informal sitting of the President and his cabinet, led to the establishment of the navy and the appointment of Felipe Carrera as its admiral. The wine had been sent by the Mogul Banana Company of New Orleans as a token of amicable relations—and certain consummated deals—between that company and the republic.

Next to the champagne the credit of the appointment belonged to Don Sabas Placido, the newly appointed minister of war.

The session had been signally tedious; the business and the wine prodigiously dry. A sudden, frankish humor of Don Sabas impelled him to the deed, spiced the grave matters of state with a whiff of agreeable playfulness.

In the order of business had come a bulletin from the department of Orilla del Mar, reporting the seizure by the custom-house officers at the coast town of Solitas of the sloop Estrella de Noche and her cargo of dry goods, patent medicines, granulated sugar, and three-star brandy. Also six Martini rifles and 10,000 Havana cigars. Caught in the act of smuggling, the sloop and cargo were now, according to law, the property of the republic.

The collector of customs, in making his statement, departed from conventional forms so far as to suggest that the confiscated vessel be converted to the use of the government. The prize was the first capture to the credit of the department for ten years. It often happened that government officials required transportation from point to point along the coast, and means were usually lacking. Furthermore, the sloop could act as a coast guard to discourage the pernicious art of smuggling. The collector would also venture to name one to whom the charge of the boat could be safely intrusted—a young man, Felipe Carrera, not, he it understood, one of extreme wisdom, but loyal, and the best sailor along the coast.

It was upon this hint that the minister of war executed his little piece of drollery that so enlivened the tedium of executive session.

In the constitution of this small, maritime banana republic was a forgotten section providing for the maintenance of a navy. The champagne was bubbling trickily in the veins of the mercurial statesman. A formidable document was prepared, incriminated with chromatic seals and jaunty with fluttering ribbons, bearing the florid signatures of state, and conferring upon el Señor Don Felipe Carrera the title of admiral of the marine fleet and force of the republic. Thus, within the space of a few minutes and the dominion of a dozen extra dry, the country rose to a place among naval powers, and Felipe Carrera became entitled to a salute of twenty-one guns whenever he should enter port.

The Southern races are lacking in that particular humor that finds entertainment in natural misfortunes. Owing to this defect, they are not moved to laughter at the deformed, the feeble-minded, or the insane. Felipe Carrera was but half-witted. Therefore, the people of Solitas called him "el pobrecito loco," saying that God had sent but half of him to earth, retaining the other. A somber youth, glowering and speaking only at the rarest times, Felipe was but negatively loco. He generally refused to answer all questions when on shore. He seemed to know that he was badly handicapped on land where so many kinds of understanding are needed, but on the water few sailors whom God had entirely and carefully completed could handle a sailboat as well. He could sail a boat five points nearer to the wind's eye than the best of them. He owned no boat, but worked among the crews of the schooners and sloops that skimmed the coast, trading, and freighting fruit out to the steamers where there was no harbor. It was through his famous boldness and skill as a sailor, as well as the pity felt for his mental imperfections that he was recommended by the collector as a suitable custodian of the captured sloop.

When the outcome of Señor Placido's little plesantry arrived in the form of the imposing commission, the collector wondered and then smiled. He sent for Felipe, placed the document in his hands, explaining carefully to him the high honor that the government had granted him. With a word, the newly created admiral took his commission and departed.

The next morning he came again to the collector, and, as he passed through the village streets many were the compassionate exclamations of "pobrecito muchacho," but never a laugh or a smile.

Somewhere, Felipe had raked to-

gether a pitiful semblance of a military uniform—a pair of red trousers, a dingy blue jacket embroidered with yellow braid, and an old fatigue cap abandoned by one of the British soldiers in Belize. In the latter he had fastened the gaudy feathers of a parrot's tail. Buckled around his waist was an ancient ship's cutlass contributed by Pedro Lafitte, the barber, who, proudly asserted its inheritance from his ancestor, the illustrious buccaneer.

At the admiral's heels tagged his newly shipped crew—three grinning, glossy black Caribs, bare to the waist; the sand in the streets spurring in a shower from the spring of their naked feet.

With becoming dignity, Felipe demanded his vessel of the collector. The collector's wife, a thin, little, yellow woman who read novels in a hammock all day, had found, in an old book, an engraving of a flag purporting to be the naval flag of the republic. Perhaps it had been so designed by the founders of the nation; but, as no navy had ever been established, oblivion had claimed its flag. With her own tawny hands she had made a flag after this pattern—a red cross upon a blue and white ground. Having a little of the romance that abounded in her novels, she presented it to Felipe with the words: "Brave sailor. This flag is of your country. It you will defend with the life. Go with God."

For the next month or two the navy had its troubles. Even the admiral was perplexed to know what to do without orders, but none came. Neither did any salaries. The sloop was rechristened El Nacional, repainted and swung idly at anchor. When Felipe's little store of money was exhausted, he went to the collector and raised the question of finances.

"Salaries!" exclaimed the collector with his hands raised. "Que salaries! Not one centavo have I received of my own for seven months. The pay of an admiral, do you ask? Quien sabe? Should it be less than three thousand pesos? Mira! You will see a revolution in this country very soon. A good sign of it is when they call for pesos, pesos, pesos; and pay none out."

Felipe left the collector with a look almost of content in his somber face. A revolution would mean fighting, and then the government would need his services. It was rather humiliating to be an admiral without anything to do, and have a hungry crew begging for reales to buy plantains and bread to eat.

When he returned to where the good-natured Caribs were hopefully waiting, they sprang up and saluted, as he had taught them.

"Come, muchachos," said the admiral. "The government is poor. It has no money at present. We will earn what we need to live upon. Soon"—his heavy eyes almost lighted up—"our help may be gladly sought for."

Thereafter El Nacional turned out with the other coast craft and freighted bananas and oranges out to the fruit steamers who could not come nearer than a mile off shore, there being no harbor at Solitas. Surely, a self-supporting navy deserves red letters in the budget of any nation!

There was a little telegraph office in Solitas whence a little telegraph line ran over the big mountains to the capital. After earning enough at freighting to keep his crew in provisions and pay for a week or two Felipe would infest this office looking like the chorus of an insolvent comic opera troupe besieging the manager's den.

sprawled in a favorite corner, upon the floor, in his fast decaying uniform, with his prodigious saber distributed between his red legs, he awaited, day after day, and week after week, the long delayed orders from his government. Each day he would inquire, gravely and expectantly, for dispatches. The operator would pretend to make a search, and reply:

"Not yet, it seems, Señor el Almirante—Poco tiempo!"

At the answer the admiral would plump himself down, with a rattle, in his corner to await the infrequent click of the little instrument on the table. Outside, in the shade of the lime trees in the calle, the crew chewed sugar cane, or slumbered, well content to serve a country with so little service.

One day in early summer the revolution predicted by the collector flamed out suddenly. It had long been smoldering. At the head of the insurgents appeared that Hector and learned Theban of the Central American republics, Don Sabas Placido. A traveler, a soldier, a poet, a scientist, a statesman, and a connoisseur—the wonder was that he could content himself with the petty, remote life of his native country.

"It is a whim of Placido's," said a friend who knew him well, "to take up political intrigue. It is not

otherwise than if he had come upon a new tempo in music; a new bacillus in the air; a new scent, or rhyme, or explosive. He will squeeze this revolution dry of sensations, and, a week afterward, forget it, skimming the seas of the world in his brigantine to add to his already world-famous collections of—por Dios!—everything—from postage stamps to maquinas de vapor."

But the esthetic Placido seemed to be creating a lively row, for a mere dilettante. The admiral of the people, they had risen almost in a body to seat him in the place of the inclement President Prados. There was sharp fighting in the capital, where (contrary to arrangements) the army had rallied to the defense of the incumbent. There was, also, lively skirmishing in most of the coast towns. It was rumored that the revolution was aided by a powerful concern in the States—the Mogul Banana Company. Two of their steamers, the Traveler and the Salvador, were known to have conveyed insurgent

crowded with a disposition of formidable trees. The sumptuous undergrowth of the tropics overpowered the land, and drowned itself in the fallow waters. Silently the sloop entered there, and met a deeper silence. Brilliant with greens and ochres and floral scarlets, the umbrageous mouth of the Rio Ruiz furnished no sound or movement save of the seagull water as it curled against the prow of the vessel. Small chance there seemed of wresting beef or provisions from that empty solitude.

The admiral decided to cast anchor, and, at the chain's rattle, the fore-t was stimulated to instant and resounding uproar. The mouth of the Rio Ruiz had only been taking a morning nap. Parrots and baboons screeched and barked in the trees; a whirring and a hissing and a booming marked the awakening of animal life; a dark blue bulk was visible for an instant, as a startled tapir fought his way through the vines.

The navy, under orders, hung in the mouth of the little river for hours. The crew served the dinner of

Felipe regarded him with a stolid face. "Provisions and beef for the barracks at Alforan," he quoted.

"No fault of the butchers, Almirante mio, that the beef awaits you not. But you are come in time to save the cattle. Get us aboard your vessel, señor, at once. You first, caballeros—a prieta. Come back for me. The boat is too small."

The dory conveyed the two officers to the sloop, and returned for the large man.

"Have you so gross a thing as food, good admiral?" he cried, when aboard. "And perhaps, coffee? Beef and provisions! Nombre de Dios! A little longer, and we could have eaten one of those mules that you, Colonel Rafael, saluted so feelingly with your sword scabbard at parting. Let us have food; and then we will sail—for the barracks at Alforan—no?"

The Caribs prepared a meal, to which the three passengers of El Nacional set themselves with famished delight. About sunset, as was its custom, the breeze veered and swept back from the mountains, cool and

sea before them, and when at length they came in sight of the bulk of a steamer lying a mile out from the town, with her lights radiating deep into the water, they held a sudden voluble and close-headed converse. The sloop was speeding as if to strike midway between ship and shore.

The large man suddenly separated from his companions and approached the scarecrow at the helm.

"My dear admiral," he said, "the government has been exceedingly remiss. I feel all the shame for it that only its ignorance of your devoted service has prevented it from sustaining. An inexcusable oversight has been made. A vessel, a uniform, and a crew worthy of your fidelity shall be furnished you. But just now, dear admiral, there is business of moment afoot. The steamer lying there is the Salvador. I and my friends desire to be conveyed to her, where we are sent on the government's business. Do us the favor to shape your course accordingly."

against the boy's hand. The admiral gave no heed to the words or the movement. Braced against the helm, he was holding the sloop dead on her shoreward course. His dull face was lit almost to intelligence by some internal conceit, that seemed to afford him joy, and found utterance in another parrot-like cackle.

"That is why they do it," he said, "so you will not see the guns. They fire—boom!—and you fall dead. With your face to the wall. Yes."

The admiral called a sudden order to his crew. The lithe, silent Caribs made fast the sheets they held and slipped down the hatchway into the hold of the sloop. When the last one had disappeared, Don Sabas, like a big, brown leopard, leaped, closed and fastened the hatch, and stood, smiling.

"No rifles, if you please, dear admiral. It was a whimsey of mine once to compile a dictionary of the Carib lengua. So I understood your order. Perhaps you will now—"

He cut short his words, for he heard a sharp "swish" of iron scraping along him. The admiral had drawn his cutlass, and was darting upon him. The blade descended, and it was only by a show of surprising agility that the large man escaped, with only a bruised shoulder, the glancing weapon. He was drawing his pistol as he sprang, and the next instant, he shot the admiral down.

Don Sabas stooped over him and rose again.

"En el corazon," he said briefly. "Senores, the navy is abolished."

Colonel Rafael sprang to the helm; the other officer hastened to loose the mainsail sheets. The boom swung round; El Nacional described a fluent curve and began to tack industriously for the Salvador.

"Strike that flag, señor," called Colonel Rafael. "Our friends on the steamer will wonder why we are sailing under it."

"Well said," cried Don Sabas. Advancing to the mast, he lowered the flag to the deck where lay its too loyal supporter. Thus ended the minister of war's little piece of after-dinner drollery, and by the same hand that began it.

Suddenly Don Sabas gave a great cry of joy and ran down the slanting deck to the side of Colonel Rafael. Across his arm he carried the flag of the extinguished navy.

"Mire! mire! señor. Ah, Dios! Already can I hear that great bear of an Oestreicher about 'Du hast mein herz gebrochen!' Mire! Of my friend, Herr Grunitz, of Vienna, you have heard me relate. That man has traveled to Ceylon for a head-dress—to Benares for a slipper—to Mozambique for a spearhead to add to his famous collections. Thou knowest, also, amigo Rafael, that I have been a gatherer of curios. My collection of battle flags of the world's navies was the most complete in existence until last year. Then Herr Grunitz secured two, oh, so rare specimens. One of a Barbary state, and one of the Makarooros, a tribe on the west coast of Africa. I have not those, but they can be procured. But this flag, señor—do you know what it is? Name of God! do you know? See that red cross upon the blue and white ground! You never saw it before? Seguramente, no. It is the marine flag of your country. Mire! This rotten tub we stand upon is its navy—that dead cockatoo lying there was its commander—that stroke of cutlass and single pistol shot a sea battle. All a piece of absurd foolery, I grant you—but authentic. There has never been another flag like this, and there never will be another. No. It is unique in the whole world. Yes. Think of what it means to a collector of flags! Do you know Colonel mio, how many golden crowns Herr Grunitz would give for this flag? Ten thousand, likely. Well, a hundred thousand would not buy it. Beautiful flag! Only flag! Little devil of a most heaven-born flag! O-he! old grumbler beyond the ocean. Wait till Don Sabas comes again to the Konigin Strasse. He will let you kneel and touch the folds of it with one finger. O-he! old spectacled ransacker of the world!"

Forgotten was the impotent revolution, the danger, the loss, the gall of the defeat. Possessed solely by the inordinate and unparalleled passion of the collector, he strode up and down the little deck, clasping to his breast with one hand the paragon of a flag. He snapped his fingers triumphantly toward the east. He shouted the paean to his prize in trumpet tones, as if he would make old Grunitz hear.

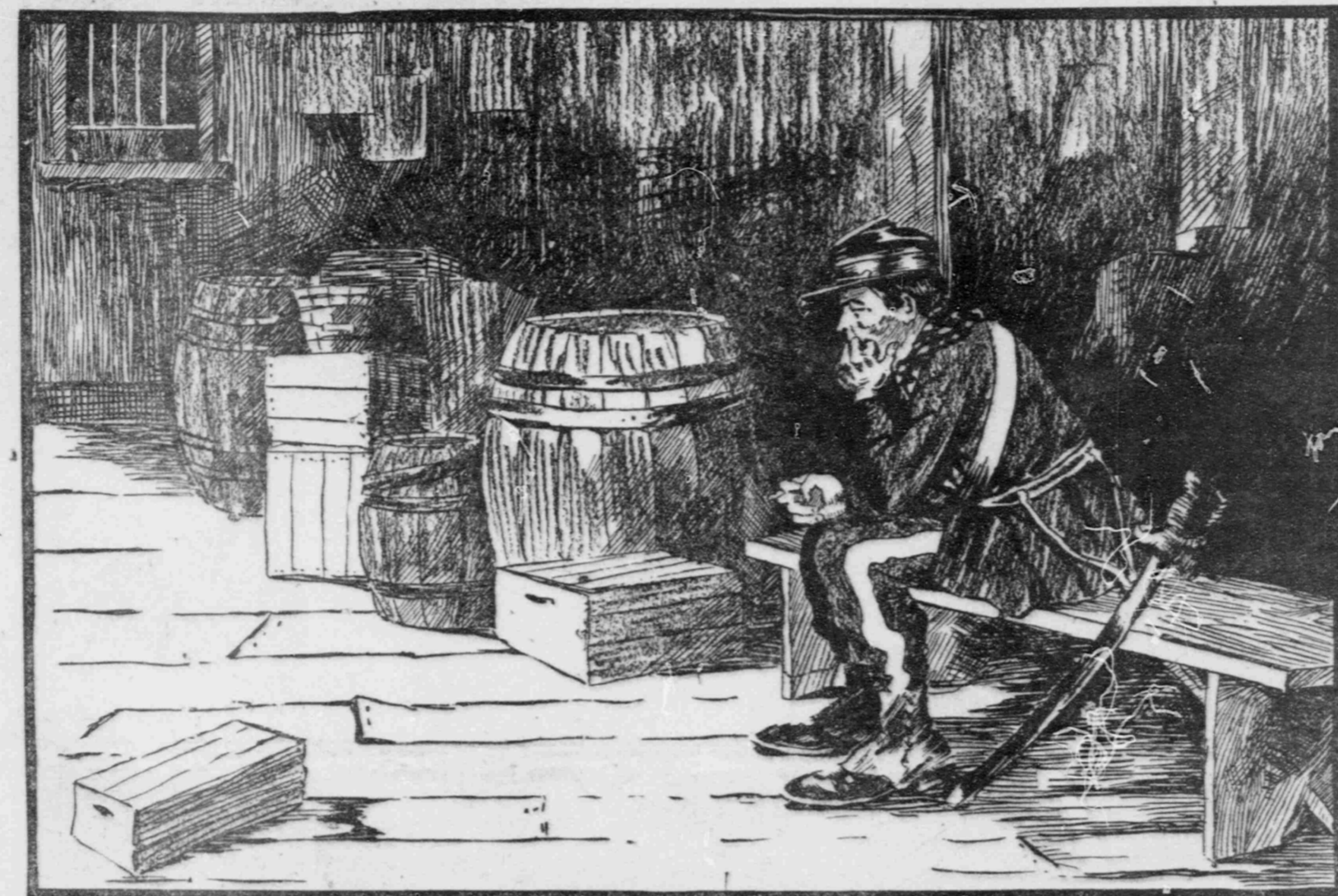
They were waiting, on the Salvador, to welcome them. The sloop came close alongside the steamer, where her sides were slicked almost to the lower deck for the loading of fruit. The sailors of the Salvador grappled and held her there.

Captain McLeod leaned over the side.

"Well, señor, the flag is up, I'm told."

"The flag is up?" Don Sabas looked

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"The operator would pretend to make a search, and reply, 'Not yet, it seems, Señor el Almirante.'"

troops from point to point along the coast.

At the first note of war the admiral of the naval fleet and force made all sail for Belize, where he traded a hastily collected cargo for cartridges for the five Martini rifles, the armament of El Nacional. Then back he hurried, to be prepared for his country's call. As yet there had been no actual uprising in Solitas. Military law ruled, and the ferment was bottled for the time. There was a report that everywhere the revolutionists were encountering defeat. In the capital the president's forces triumphed, and there was a rumor that the leaders of the revolt had been forced to flee, hotly pursued.

In the little telegraph office at Solitas there was always a gathering of officials and loyal citizens, awaiting news from the seat of government. One morning the telegraph key began clicking, and presently the operator called, loudly: "One telegram for el Almirante, Don Señor Felipe Carrera!"

There was a shuffling sound; a great rattling of tin scabbard, and the admiral, prompt at his spot of waiting, leaped across the room to receive it.

The message was handed to him. Slowly spelling it out, he found it to be his first official order—thus running:

"Proceed immediately with your vessel to mouth of Rio Ruiz; transport beef and provisions to barracks, at Alforan. Martinez, General."

Small glory, to be sure, in this, his country's first call. But it had called, and joy surged in the admiral's breast. He drew his cutlass belt to another buckle hole, roused his dozing crew, and in a quarter of an hour El Nacional was tacking swiftly down coast in a stiff landward breeze.

The Rio Ruiz is a small river, emptying into the sea ten miles below Solitas. That portion of the coast is wild and solitary. Through a gorge in the Cordilleras rushes the Rio Ruiz, cold and bubbling, to glide at the last, with breadth and leisure, through an alluvial morass into the sea.

In two hours El Nacional entered the river's mouth. The banks were

shark's fin soup, plantains, crab gumbo, and sour claret. The admiral, with a three-foot telescope, closely scanned the impervious foliage fifty yards away.

It was nearly sunset when a reverberating "hallo-o-o" came from the forest to their left. It was answered, and three men, mounted upon mules, crashed through the tropic tangle to within a dozen yards of the river's bank. There they dismounted; and one, unbuckling his belt, struck each mule a violent blow with his sword scabbard, so that they, with a fling of heels, dashed back again into the forest.

Those were strange-looking men to be conveying beef and provisions. One was a large and exceedingly active man, of striking presence. He was of the purest Spanish type, with curling dark hair, gray besprinkled, blue, sparkling eyes, and the pronounced air of a caballero grande. The other two were small, brown-faced men, wearing white military uniforms, high riding boots and swords.

The clothes of all were drenched, bespattered and rent by the thicket. Some stress of circumstance must have driven them, diablo a quatre, through, floor, mire and jungle.

"O-he! Señor Almirante," called the large man. "Send to us your boat."

The dory was lowered, and Felipe, with one of the Caribs, rowed toward the left bank.

The large man stood near the water's brink, waist deep in the curling vines. As he gazed upon the scarecrow figure in the stern of the dory a sprightly interest beamed upon his mobile face. Months of wageless and thankless service had dimmed the admiral's splendor. His red trousers were patched and ragged. Most of the bright buttons and yellow braid were gone from his jacket. The visor of his cap was torn, and depended almost to his eyes. The admiral's feet were bare.

"Dear admiral," cried the large man, and his voice was like a blast from a horn. "I kiss your hands. I know we could build upon your fidelity. You had our dispatch—from General Martinez. A little never with your boat, dear admiral. Upon these evils of shifting vines we stand with the smallest security."

and steady, bringing a taste of the stagnant lagoons and mango swamps that guttered the lowlands. The mainsail of the sloop was hoisted and swelled to it, and at that time moment they heard shouts and a waxing clamor from the bosky profundities of the wood.

"The butchers, my dear admiral," said the large man, smiling, "too late for the slaughter."

Further than his orders to his crew, the admiral was saying nothing. The topsail and jib were spread, and the sloop glided out of the estuary. The large man and his companions had bestowed themselves with what comfort they could about the bare deck. Belike, the big thing in their minds had been their departure of that critical shore; and now that the hazard was so far reduced their thoughts were loosed to the consideration of further deliverance. But when they saw the sloop turn and fly upcoast again they relaxed, satisfied with the course the admiral had taken.

The large man sat at ease, his spirited blue eye engaged in the contemplation of the navy's commander. He was trying to estimate this somber and fantastic lad, whose impenetrable fondality puzzled him. Himself a fugitive, his life sought, and chafing under the smart of defeat and failure, it was characteristic of him to transfer instantly his interest to the study of a thing new to him. It was like him, too, to have conceived and risked all upon this last desperate and madcap scheme—this message to a poor, crazed fanatic cruising about with his grotesque uniform and his farcical title. But his companions had been at their wits' end; escape had seemed incredible and now he was pleased at the success of the plan they had called crack-brained and precarious.

The brief, tropic twilight seemed to slide swiftly into the pearly splendor of a moonlit night. And now the lights of Solitas appeared, distributed against the darkening shore to their right. The admiral stood, silent, at the tiller; the Caribs, like black panthers, held the sheets, leaping noiselessly at his short commands. The three passengers were watching intently the

Without replying, the admiral gave a sharp command, and put the tiller hard to port. El Nacional swerved, and headed, straight as an arrow's course, for the shore.

"Do me the favor," said the large man, a trifle restively, "to acknowledge, at least, that you catch the sound of my words." It was possible that the fellow might be lacking in senses as well as intellect.

The admiral emitted a croaking, harsh laugh, and spoke.

"They will stand you," he said, "with your face to a wall and shoot you dead. That is the way they kill traitors. I knew you when you stepped into my boat. I have seen your picture in a book. You are Sabas Placido, traitor to your country. With your face to a wall. So, you will die. I am the admiral, and I will take you to them. With your face to a wall. Yes."

Don Sabas had turned and waved his hand, with a ringing laugh, toward his fellow-fugitives. "To you caballeros, I have related the history of that banquet when we issued that O! so ridiculous commission. Of a truth, our jest has been turned against us. Behold the Frankenstein's monster we have created!"

Don Sabas glanced toward the shore. The lights of Solitas were drawing nearer. He could see the bench, the warehouse of the Bodega Nacional, the long, curtained occupied by the soldiers, and behind that, gleaming in the moonlight, a stretch of high 'dobe wall. He had seen men stood with their faces to that wall and shot dead.

Again he addressed the extravagant figure at the helm.

"It is true," he said, "that I am fleeing the country. But, receive the assurance that I care very little for that. Courts and camps everywhere are open to Sabas Placido. Vaya! what is this molehill of a republic—this pig's head of a country—to a man like me? I am a pansano of everywhere. In Roma, Londres, Viena, Nuevo York, Madrid, you will hear them say: 'Welcome back, Don Sabas.' Come! tonto—baboon of a boy—admiral—whatever you call yourself—turn your boat! Put us on board the Salvador, and here is your pay—five hundred pesos in money of the Estados Unidos—more than your lying government will pay you in twenty years."

Don Sabas pressed a plump purse